



TRUCKS AND TROJAN HORSES

16 February 2022

PRELIMINARY OSINT ANALYSIS OF THE “FREEDOM CONVOY 2022”

KEY POINTS

The “Freedom Convoy” protest and occupation is not an unprecedented event. Severe economic or societal stresses amplified by rapid technological change deepen societal alienation and provide breeding grounds for civil unrest and social polarization. However, the convergence of several elements make this protest/occupation somewhat more sophisticated and unique: the use of social media for organizing and communicating both internally and externally, the use of misinformation and disinformation to promote certain narratives, the use of crowdfunding and cryptocurrencies, blockade tactics and logistics, the virulence of discourse towards government and elected officials, appropriation of national symbols, international support and recognition, knowledge of police enforcement tactics, and disruption in multiple Canadian cities and border crossings.

The overwhelming majority of protesters around the “Freedom Convoy” have denounced violence and are not directly aligned to or members of any specific group or ideology. There is clearly a wide range of participants from the ideologically motivated, the disenfranchised, people just fed up with the pandemic and protest tourists. While the initial and nominal rallying cry for protestors was around vaccine mandates and public health measures, there is a general distrust of government institutions, perceptions of excessive government control and an anti-elite sentiment. Adherence to conspiracy narratives is also prominent.

The movement is also attracting individuals who hold ideologically motivated violent extremist (IMVE) beliefs and may feel emboldened in their views amid the movement’s perceived popularity by national and international supporters.¹ Xenophobic and neo-Nazi flags were on display at a number of events, as well as the symbols and some adherents known to be associated with alt-right movements, Diagonol, Canada First, Kingdom of Canada and the Three Percenters.

It is unlikely that premeditated violence will take place, however, some individuals “lone actors” or small groups motivated by an anti-government/militia worldview could be willing to engage in serious violence to further their objectives. The seizure of a cache of weapons in Alberta indicates a willingness to use violence. A ‘lone actor’ attack remains the most likely use of violence. Non-empirical analysis of social media suggests heightened risks for government and elected officials.

It is highly unlikely that there is centralized leadership exerting clear and consistent command and control across the whole protest movement. Nonetheless, several individuals have presented themselves as core spokespeople and seem to exert some level of control. Many of these core spokespeople/organizers are connected to extremist views, have used threats, and have previous connections with the 2019 United We Roll campaign. Previous protests in the Canada and the U.S. have seen populists, alt-right groups, white supremacists, conspiracy advocates etc. prove adept at infiltrating, co-opting, or even taking over grievance-based protests. The risk being that movements are used wittingly or unwittingly as “Trojan Horses” for political agendas that undermine or attack government institutions, the rule of law, and human rights.

The “Freedom Convoy” has received significant international financial support and publicity. The bulk of financial flows to the “Freedom Convoy” are small amounts (e.g., C\$100 or less).² According to unverified leaked information from Give Send Go, from 2-10 February, almost 56% of total transactions (comprising less than C\$4 million), came from the USA. Canadians donated more money, however (C\$4.3 million). Financial support has likely reinforced the protestors’ resolve. A significant portion of engagement and activity continues to come from US online communities, driven by key US influencers, alternative media and political actors.³

The “Freedom Convoy” itself or new entities that emerge from it are likely to continue for several weeks and will seek new opportunities to protest, occupy and disrupt. It may also embolden other groups and individual movements across the ideological spectrum. There are also risks that the protests may serve to deepen and harden new and existing cleavages within Canadian society. As the protests persist, these feelings may become more entrenched and form the basis for longer-term societal schisms.

Motivations

The “Freedom Convoy” is a broad cause around which individuals are rallying, the majority of whom are not aligned with any specific group or ideology. Many participants have little to no connections with the trucking industry but espouse a range of anti-public health and other grievances, both online and in-person.

There is, however, a smaller group that espouse more extreme views and who are likely leveraging the protest to advance their own anti-government/authority agenda.

Fueled in part by conspiracy theories, unifying characteristics of the “Freedom Convoy” include opposition to public health restrictions and vaccines mandates, general distrust of institutions and perceptions of excessive government control. This also includes personal grievances (e.g., loss of employment due to COVID).

Recent emergency measures will likely reinforce the core ideological beliefs of these individuals. Narratives consisting of “holding the line” and there is “no police solution” contribute to this.

Xenophobic, neo-Nazi flags and conspiracy theory symbols and rhetoric were on display at a number of events. Similarly, a number of online threats have been made, many against public health and government officials.⁴

Even though objectionable, these symbols have been seen at other protests. And, while they do not explicitly portend violence, they have generated alarm, condemnation and fear amongst many Canadians and human rights and other organizations. Aboriginal, Jewish, immigrant, LGBTQ2, women’s and other civil rights groups have expressed serious concerns at the symbols and rhetoric being used.

We are not aware of any organized and/or premeditated acts of ideologically motivated violence.

Nonetheless, some violence could occur in response to enforcement action, or in the course of protest activity.⁵ The combination of highly emotive issues with large crowds could lead to spontaneous acts of violence.

Lone actors or small groups may also use the convoy as cover to conduct acts of ideologically motivated violence.

Leadership

The “Freedom Convoy” and convergent protesters are mainly decentralized. It is unlikely that there is a central leadership exerting clear and consistent “command and control” across the whole movement. Indeed, it appears that several of the nominal leaders are competing for the microphone and have different messaging.

Some current and former law enforcement, intelligence and military have joined the protesters. There are estimates in the media of 150 such individuals. In public statements, some have highlighted their past security work for the government even as they claim the Parliament elected last fall has no legitimacy. The assistance of such individuals may also generate perceptions that enforcement personnel are fragmented over public health measures.⁶

Moreover, we judge that some protesters may acquire defensive equipment (gas masks, protective clothing, etc), or acquire basic operational counter-policing and counter-intelligence techniques.

According to a body of media reporting, the following individuals—who have past connections with the 2019 United We Roll campaign—seem to exert some level influence, notably:

Tamara Lich has established herself as the convoy’s main organizer and spokesperson. At the onset of the convoy, she welcomed the support of a group known as Canada Unity that called for the Senate and the Governor General to take over government and end vaccination mandates.

Chris Barber is a fully vaccinated trucker from Saskatchewan who says he supports peaceful protests. He is opposed to “government overreach,” trucking associations who do not support the convoy, and Prime Minister Trudeau and the Liberal government.

Benjamin Dichter is a double vaccinated podcast producer who ran unsuccessfully for the Conservatives in Toronto-Danforth in 2015. He was the leading organizer of the now frozen GoFundMe campaign.

Pat King is a resident of Alberta and has a large following on social media; he effectively encouraged convoy participants to comply with Ottawa’s anti-honking injunction. King appears to have extreme views—he has hundreds of thousands of views of his social media postings that veer into conspiracy theories, reportedly including an immigration scheme that would see the “depopulation of the Caucasian race”. His online and public rhetoric referred to plans to target politicians’ (doxxing) homes and that “the only way that this is going to be solved is with bullets.”

We do not know the extent, if any, and the nature of the connections between “Freedom Convoy” participants and any listed terrorist entities in Canada.

Size & Scope

The “Freedom Convoy” is dynamic and its size varies; the number of protestors ranges from dozens of individuals to several thousand, notably on weekends in Ottawa (up to 8000 people, including some protest “tourists”). The actual number of participants is difficult to gauge although along with organizers there appears to be a few hundred in a committed core.

There are a small number of protestors within the “Freedom Convoy” movement with more extreme anti-government, anti-authority and conspiratorial views and motivations.⁷ While this does not mean that they will engage in serious violence to achieve their political objectives, recent arrests in Alberta that uncovered weapons and armoured protective gear indicate the potential for serious violence.

The long-term intent of this small group of committed individuals will likely pose a challenge to national security agencies and law enforcement.

Communications and Social Media

Preparations for the convoy protests reportedly largely began on the Telegram cross-platform messaging app. This platform has enhanced privacy and encryption features as well as large group chat features.

One of the larger Telegram channels appears to have approximately 30,000 followers. There appears to be a Telegram channel for most countries experiencing protests.

The “Freedom Convoy” also uses Zello, originally designed as a communications application for frontline emergency workers, to share updates and logistics. For example, during the Ambassador Bridge blockade, protesters used a channel called “Windsor convoy 2” encouraging protesters to “hold the line”, until the channel was hacked.

Protest movement interaction via various social media feeds likely reaches millions of people; as an analog, according to diplomatic reporting, protesters in NZ posted 365 videos in the last week, which generated 4.9 million views.

Misinformation and disinformation has permeated the protest occupation – while we are not seeing organised foreign interference at this stage it does represent a clear opportunity authoritarian states and extremists groups to further promote their narratives.

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Financing

Our understanding of the financial flows in support of the convoy is limited. We do not have the data to determine the precise amounts, nor the exact origin, of all the foreign sources of funding. It is clear, however, that there is significant funding from foreign donors. Media Reports indicate that the U.S. is the largest foreign donor and that there have been donations from several countries including: U.S., U.K., Australia, Israel, Ireland, and several others.

According to unverified information leaked from crowdfunding site GiveSendGo, almost 56% of individuals who donated (totalling less than C\$4 million dollars) are based in the USA. This crowdfunding campaign also included contributions from anonymous donors (including a large transaction of US\$215,000)⁸.

At the aggregate level, we believe that most financial transactions are small amounts.

Protesters have established at least two bitcoin fundraisers. This could allow them to raise large amount of funds that would otherwise raise suspicions if conducted through regular personal or business banking accounts. The use of the cryptocurrencies also points to the convoy leaders’ understanding of regulatory oversight.

Although the risk of the convoy-related fundraising being used to fund terrorist activity is currently very low, the approach of the “Freedom Convoy” is consistent with the financing trends observed amongst IMVE threat actors, notably the use of cryptocurrencies.

In addition to these crowdfunding options, open sources suggest that cash donations are accepted and some organizers intend to auction convoy-branded clothing to raise funds. A quick survey of on-line anti-political and other protest products shows a surprising array of purveyors and products.

Foreign Influence

The “Freedom Convoy” has received support internationally. A significant portion of engagement and activity continues to come from US online communities, driven by key US influencers, alternative media and political actors. US Republican political figures, including former President Donald Trump, Sen. Ted Cruz and Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene have publically supported the movement in Canada.⁹

We have not observed any significant indicators of foreign state-linked interference. Aggregated reporting from both the RCMP and GAC (RRM Canada) notes organic activity by average users and citizens is driving a significant proportion of content and engagement online.¹⁰

We do not know the extent, if any, of any “operational” cross-border connections between designated terrorist entities associated with far-right groups in Canada with like-minded sympathizers in the USA.

Outlook

We continue to assess that the vast majority of protesters are non-violent, though arrests and charges have resulted; there are probably diverse views regarding the use of violence.¹¹

The presence of some families at events probably limits the likelihood of violence. Nonetheless, national narratives to “hold the line” and to adopt protest actions that could significantly disrupt critical infrastructure are indicative of an escalation in protest tactics.

The protests will likely continue for a long period of time in different forms. Their base of support will likely grow and expand to fit a wider set of narratives and perceived grievances.

The protests are not limited to the physical occupation as they include significant online and media participation from all over the country (and internationally) and represent a broader challenge with potential long-term societal impacts.

The undercurrents of social discord that permeate the discussion include:

- **We the people:** a separation between what is perceived as the common citizen (or Canadian street) versus the political elites.
- **Government has failed:** feelings of dissatisfaction and mistrust of government and its institutions because they are seen to have failed to protect and serve the citizenry. This includes government as a whole, as well as individuals (e.g. MPs, Cabinet, and the Prime Minister).
- **The erosion of rights and freedoms:** belief that inherent rights and freedoms guaranteed by Canadian law have been eroded or withheld. This drives the imperative to take action and regain these rights and freedoms.
- **Us vs. Them:** when perceived lines are drawn in the sand delineating the in-group and the out-group (e.g. those making a stand for freedom and those who are not). There is an additional risk that identity may become tied to the movement itself as opposed to the initial motivations for protesting.

PCO/IAS products may be shared with Government of Canada partners. It is important to note that while they are PROTECTED A, they are RESTRICTED and not releasable to the public, nor should they be sent/forwarded to personal email addresses. **This product is based on open sources.**

ENDNOTES

¹ RCMP IMCIT, Feb 16

² RCMP IMCIT, Feb 16

³ GAC RRM Canada input, Feb 15

⁴ RCMP, IMCIT, Jan 31

⁵ RCMP Special Threat Advisory, Feb 10

⁶ RCMP IMCIT, Feb 16

⁷ RCMP IMCIT, Jan 25, 2022

⁸ RCMP IMCIT, FEB 16

⁹ GAC RRM Canada input, Feb 15

¹⁰ RCMP IMCIT, Feb 10 & GAC RRM INFO, FEB 13

¹¹ RCMP, IMCIT, Feb 10